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ABSTRACT

Procedures are described for use in foreign language classes that tap the characteristics of gifted students. Each activity is directly associated with at least one of the cognitive characteristics attributed to the gifted, which are listed in the introductory section of the paper. The procedures include the following activities: conducting a classroom census to determine special interests and capabilities, possibly by having students tape-record presentations on their interests; providing ample listening material and having students keep a log of listening; having students use the "Provisional Proficiency Guidelines" to evaluate their own and other students' oral skills; using monolingual dictionaries and thesauruses to play word games; having students analyze pictures from a vertical file to develop hypotheses about foreign cultures, to be tested by consulting other sources; and asking students to share their own mnemonic devices with other students. Gifted students have a wide range of cognitive skills that teachers can take advantage of to develop interesting and effective language-learning activities. (MSE)

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5 Foreign Language for the Gifted: Extending Cognitive Dimensions

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Including foreign language instruction in a program for gifted, creative, or talented students, usually means offering it earlier than to most students. Curricular patterns may also change to offer languages that have not been taught before. Another variable is the number of hours devoted to study. Gifted students are likely to be encouraged to fulfill an essentially unchanged group of objectives in less time than that allowed for other students.

None of these changes are wrong or unacceptable. In fact, they are commendable ways to achieve the lower level objectives' (knowledge and comprehension) that must be achieved before groups of gifted students can go on to application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Gifted, talented, or creative students, however, are so classified because they are more capable than others of carrying out objectives that go beyond knowledge and comprehension.

Gifted Students: Definition and Description

The literature is replete with definitions of giftedness. Some are as broad as Witty's, "(children) whose performance is consistently remarkable in any potentially valuable area."² Others have indicated that only those in the top two percent of intelligence tests are to be considered gifted. For our purposes, the legal definition provided by the 97th Congress of the United States will serve. Public Law 97-35: Education

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Consolidation and Improvement Act, 1981, Section 582 says that gifted and talented children are those "... who give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership capacity or specific academic fields and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such capabilities."

The legal definition is extremely broad. It expands the category to include the talented, guaranteeing that fewer people will be excluded. "Give evidence" might even include a poorly adjusted recluse whose reticence somehow appears to hide a great talent.

So be it. Today's foreign language teachers have no quarrel with including a large range of talents in their classes to be sure that no one is denied a chance. However, curriculum planners need to recognize that members of any gifted population probably share some cognitive characteristics which ought to influence curricular structure.

Clark³ has suggested "differential cognitive characteristics of the gifted." They can deal with extraordinary quantities of information and have unusual retentiveness; they are capable of advanced comprehension; they have unusually varied interests and curiosity; they have high levels of language development and verbal ability; they process information unusually well; their thought processes are flexible and rapid; they are capable of comprehensive synthesis; they can delay closure at early ages; they see unusual and diverse relationships more vividly than others; they think in alternatives and abstract terms thus demonstrating early differential patterns for thought processing; they generate original ideas and solutions; they use and form conceptual frameworks; they maintain an evaluative approach to themselves and others; and finally, their behavior is persistently goal-directed.

Each of these characteristics suggests a need for curricular structure that goes beyond the lowest levels of cognitive skills described by Bloom.⁴

Recommended Procedures

For the reader's convenience, each of the following recommended procedures is directly associated with at least one of the cognitive characteristics listed above. Both the procedures and the characteristics are chiefly cognitive in nature. As our title suggests, there is no attempt here to deal

with either characteristics or procedures that are chiefly affective in nature, although it would certainly be advisable to attempt to do so at a later date. The intent here is to list and describe cognitive characteristics of gifted, talented, and creative students with plans for teaching and learning that emphasize higher level cognitive skills.

Unusually varied interests and curiosity are commonly seen among gifted students. In order to make use of these interests for curriculum development, teachers will need to know what they are. So the first proposed activity is a census. The census may be done in English, if that seems advisable. It can be done with a form that the teacher can duplicate. The form should ask for the student's name and a listing of interests he or she most frequently pursues during the school day and after. If "work" is listed, it should be specified. Knowing student interests and curiosities makes it possible to plan activities to suit them. A foreign language encyclopedia (available for photocopying) will be a good starting place to search for reading material on the various interests expressed. More important, the search itself should be well within the capability of gifted students who can compose short, easily understood presentations on their interests for fellow students. The best of these can be converted to presentations on cassettes (possibly accompanied by slides made by those with an interest in photography) for use in future efforts to work with comprehension.

Since advanced comprehension skills are also characteristic of gifted students, it becomes important to intensify the variety and amount of listening material made available. The teacher who lives in or near a city with a local foreign language radio or television station can ask students to record programming (especially commercials) for use in providing intensive lectures. Those not so blessed can contact foreign broadcasters (Organization of American States in Washington or Radio Nacional de España for Spanish, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for French). German teachers can seek help from the Goethe Institute. Whatever the source, the most important step is to see that gifted students have ample listening material. They should also keep a log of listening and a diary of listening successes which can be rewarded with portions of the class grade.

Advanced work in listening may soon be followed by steps to make use of the verbal ability of gifted students. This means taking steps to teach for communication. Any adult who has tried to assimilate new knowledge

quickly has observed that assimilation takes place most readily when the learner has an immediate chance to apply the new knowledge. But gifted students can go onward from immediate application. In fact, they might even use the *Provisional Proficiency Guidelines*³ by themselves (or with minimal guidance) to evaluate their own efforts or those of younger students. This would certainly be operating at the very top of Bloom's cognitive scale and, at the same time, would make teaching and learning foreign language speaking skills relevant to everyday life.

The high level of language development attributed to gifted students will serve them in second language learning as well as it has served their native language development.

Using monolingual dictionaries and thesauruses available through catalogs, gifted students should be encouraged to go beyond the memorization of word lists. They can apply words to new contexts, analyze relationships between similar lexical items, and synthesize presentations of vocabulary which show their fellow students how relationships can be used. They can write puzzles and vocabulary building exercises for use in class. (One of many potential uses of the computer would be to establish a file of such student-developed exercises for future use.)

Students' advanced ability to process information is readily used in second language reading. The first recommendation, as discussed above, is to make use of interests when selecting material to be read. A foreign language Bible given out by a group like Gideons International or a popular magazine may strike student interest. The capacity to process information comes into play when the student has to transfer facts from one medium of expression to another. Information in paragraphs, for example, can be reduced to graphs.⁴ If students have their own home computers, they can readily provide graphic media to be used for such exercises in information transfer.

Flexible thought processes and the ability to delay closure are two characteristics that can enable gifted students to construct and check the hypotheses they draw about foreign cultures. Most learners don't want to wait, but make quick judgments based on casual observation. Having heard Mexico called the "land of *mañana*," some people presume that Mexicans are unwilling to work. That is one possible conclusion to be drawn from seeing people constantly told that something would be done *mañana*. Another more likely one is that it is unacceptably impolite in

some cultures to say "No, I won't." Gifted children should be able to use their abilities to analyze pictures from a vertical file at the library and make tentative cultural hypotheses which they can later evaluate by using alternative sources of information. That is, they can use a kind of scientific method to make observations and, later, draw tentative conclusions to be verified.

Gifted students are similarly thought to be capable of comprehensive synthesis. This capability would be especially useful in the teaching of writing. Gifted students should be able to use their talents "to express hypotheses and conjectures, to present arguments or points of view accurately and effectively."⁷

An early ability to use and form conceptual frameworks makes it possible for gifted students to deal efficiently with grammatical concepts. They develop their own mnemonic devices, facilitating the memory work involved in all language learning. Since this is likely to happen with or without the teacher's participation, it might be advisable to encourage gifted students to work in pairs⁸ or other small groups to share the learning aids they develop for themselves.

It has also been suggested that gifted students develop differential patterns for thought processing at earlier ages than others. They are thus capable of dealing with humor, double meaning, figurative meaning, sets of symbols, and abstract concepts in second language work. All of these, of course, are elements of higher level cognitive operations.

Generating original ideas and solutions are also typical of the gifted student. These skills can be stimulated during creative thinking—the highest levels of communicative language learning (for example, role-playing requiring hypothesis or support of opinion).

Last is the ability gifted students have to learn at an accelerated pace. This is an important characteristic which explains the nature of most programs for the gifted as they are today.

Conclusion

In this discussion, we have attempted to cite procedures for use in foreign language classes that tap the characteristics of gifted students and that require the higher levels of cognitive activity described by Bloom.⁹ Admittedly there is no one-to-one relationship between activities and

characteristics, since some of the characteristics are appropriately associated with several different activities.

It can be validly argued that these are not procedures just for the gifted, that they are no more than good teaching procedures. However, if good teaching were more universal, the gifted and talented would have fewer problems.

Finally, one may ask if there are model programs that actually do make use of the characteristics of gifted students to teach higher level cognitive skills in foreign language classes. Indeed, there are several in various parts of the country. One of the more interesting was never really intended as a program for the gifted *per se*. It just happened to serve them. We refer to the Glenbrook Academy of International Studies, a genuinely interdisciplinary English, social studies, and foreign language program established near Chicago in 1981.¹⁰

We make one last plea. The one item that is most critical to success of foreign language studies for the gifted is the opportunity to use the language. Studying for knowledge and comprehension alone at an increased rate of speed may result in great quantities of learning. It will not, however, enhance the quality of learning. To do that, we must expand the breadth and depth of the curriculum by providing for learning at higher levels of cognitive effort.

Notes

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